

Mental health and how to cope: For families and students

PRESENTED BY NORTHERN VIRGINIA FAMILY SERVICE



Northern Virginia
Family Service

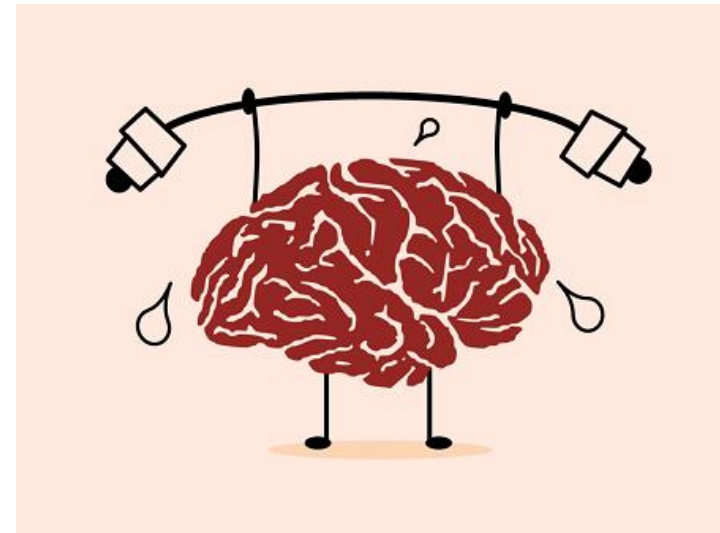
Introductions and Objectives

- ▶ **What is Northern Virginia Family Service?**
- ▶ **Who are we?**

- ▶ **Learning about mental health and Traumatic experiences**
- ▶ **Learning strategies for coping with anxiety and depression.**
- ▶ **How to connect with resources in the community if your family needs more support**

What is mental health?

- ▶ **Definition: a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life.**
- ▶ Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act, and helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.



Trauma

Definition: Trauma is an event that causes high stress and anxiety. It is, an experience where a person feels in fear for their life or safety or the life or safety of someone they love. They feel overwhelmed, hopeless and powerless.

Trauma experiences include:

- ▶ Violence
- ▶ Witness/exposure to violence
- ▶ Abuse
- ▶ Neglect
- ▶ War
- ▶ Refugee Experiences
- ▶ Terrorism
- ▶ Immigration Experiences
- ▶ Medical Trauma
- ▶ Natural Disasters
- ▶ Traumatic Grief/loss
- ▶ Divorce/separation

Myths and Facts

Myths

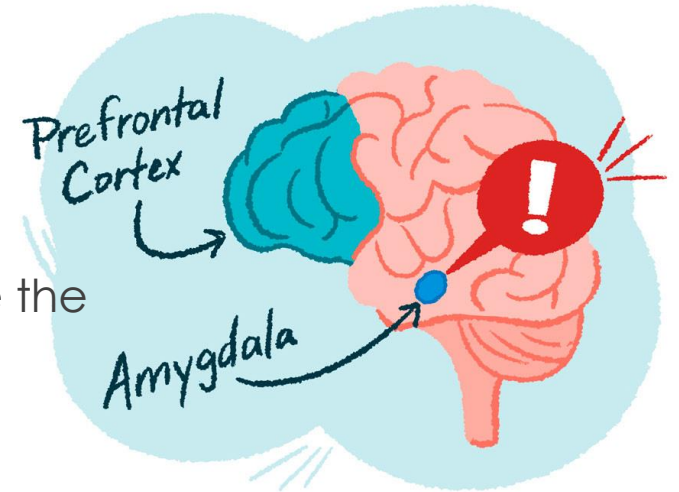
- ▶ 1 Life-time threatening experience
- ▶ Only direct experience can cause Trauma
- ▶ Its all in our heads
- ▶ Negative life-long impact

Facts

- ▶ Stem from a variety of different experiences
- ▶ Witnessing others
- ▶ Cause real physical & mental symptoms
- ▶ Trauma can stimulate strength and personal growth *

What can a traumatic experience do to the brain?

- ▶ If trauma is prolonged, extreme, or repetitive, it can physically injure the brain.
- ▶ The Amygdala ("The Body Guard") can become STUCK in an alert state. The Body continues to sense danger when there is none and sends out Stress Response Signals!
- ▶ The Pre-frontal Cortex (rational thinking) turns off
- ▶ The person who experienced the trauma, keeps living the traumatic experience "IN THE MOMENT!"
- ▶ Long after the trauma ends, the person may become unable to separate the present moment from a memory. ("NOW/SAFE" from "THEN/DANGER!")



Trauma Reactions in Elementary Age

- Clingy with teacher or parent
- Worry about their own or others safety
- Anxious and fearful
- Feel guilt or shame
- Tell others about the traumatic experience over and over again
- Become upset if they get a small bump or bruise
- Have a hard time concentrating
- Experience numbness
- Have fears that the event will happen again
- Have difficulty sleeping
- Show changes in school performance
- Become easily startled
- Anger/irritation

Trauma Reactions in Middle & High School Children

- Feel depressed and alone
- Discuss the traumatic events in detail
- Develop eating disorders and self-harming behaviors such as cutting
- Start using or abusing alcohol or drugs
- Become sexually active
- Take too many risks
- Feel like they're going crazy
- Feel different from everyone else
- Have sleep disturbances
- Don't want to go to places that remind them of the event
- Say they have no feeling about the event
- Show changes in behavior

The Effects of Trauma

- Traumatic experiences shape children and youths' beliefs and expectations about :
 - Self
 - Adults who care for them
 - The world
- Unaddressed trauma can lead children and teens (and the adults they become) to adopt the following beliefs about:
 - Self – as not worthy /not lovable
 - Adults who care for them – as not trustworthy, not helpful, not going to stick around
 - The world – NOT SAFE
- These “beliefs” can be unlearned – there is hope!

The Effects of Trauma on Development

- Long-term trauma can interfere with healthy development. It can therefore affect :
 - Ability to trust others
 - Sense of personal safety
 - Ability to manage emotions
 - Ability to navigate and adjust to life's changes
 - Physical and emotional responses to stress
 - Think abstractly
 - Anticipate and consider the consequences of behavior
 - Accurately judge danger and safety
 - Modify and control behavior to meet long-term goals

The Effects of Trauma on Family Functioning

- Behaviors related to trauma symptoms are often interpreted as deliberate misbehavior by parents / caregivers, increasing conflict in the home.
- Relationships and connectedness can be greatly affected by the lack of trust and confidence trauma can cause, inhibiting a parent's ability to parent effectively.

How does our body respond to sadness?



Depression



Sad or bad mood. A child may seem sad, lonely, unhappy, cranky or grouchy. It can last weeks or months.

Outbursts or crying. A child may cry more easily. They may have more tantrums than before.

Being self-critical. Kids going through depression may complain a lot. They may say self-critical things like, "I can't do anything right." "I don't have any friends." "I can't do this." "It's too hard for me."

Lack of energy and effort. Depression can drain a child's energy. They might put less effort into school than before. Even doing little tasks can feel like too much effort. Kids may seem tired, give up easily, or not try.

Trouble concentrating

Not enjoying things. Kids don't have as much fun with friends or enjoy playing like before. They may not feel like doing things they used to enjoy.

Sleep and eating changes. Kids may not sleep well or seem tired even if they get enough sleep. Some may not feel like eating. Others may overeat.

Aches and pains. Some children may have stomach aches or other pains. Some miss school days because of not feeling well, even though they aren't sick.

Thoughts of death or hurting ourselves

Normalize emotions and feelings

- ▶ Label feelings, helping them put words to feelings “I am sad”, “I am mad”
 - ▶ Asking them to describe the feeling “what does it feel like?” , “what does your body feel like?”,
 - ▶ Describing common feelings, body responses.
 - ▶ Teaching our kids it's okay to feel negative feeling
 - ▶ Builds safety
 - ▶ Normalize and model feeling Anger, stress, sad, annoyed, etc.
 - ▶ Share your experiences with them to normalize and create trust.
 - ▶ Ask them to create a list of things that will boost their mood “coloring, listening to music, going outside, doing an activity together, movie”.
 - ▶ Normalize: It's okay to ask for help, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

The Importance of Play

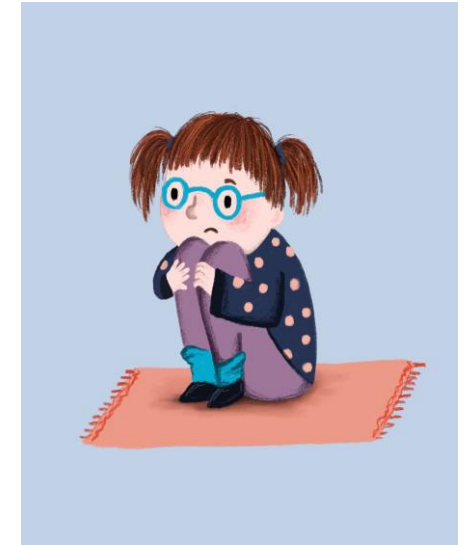
- ▶ Play is universal and helps children (& adults) to
 - ▶ communicate, connect, develop creative thinking, role-play, tackle developmental challenges, problem-solve, experiment,
 - ▶ SHOW what's on their mind. Some children find it easier to draw how they feel.
 - ▶ Trust process: whatever is important eventually comes forward.



What does Anxiety feel like?

Symptoms:

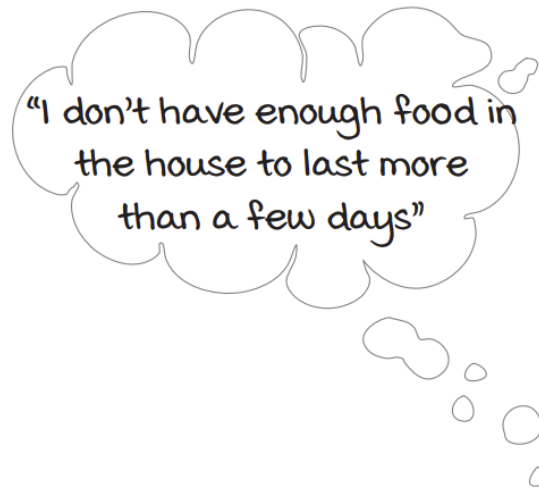
- Constant fear that something bad is going to happen (real vs hypothetical)
- Difficulty sleeping
- Dizziness
- Excessive worrying
- Irritability
- Rapid heartbeat
- Restlessness
- Sweating
- Muscle tension



Actual Problems Vs. Hypothetical Problems

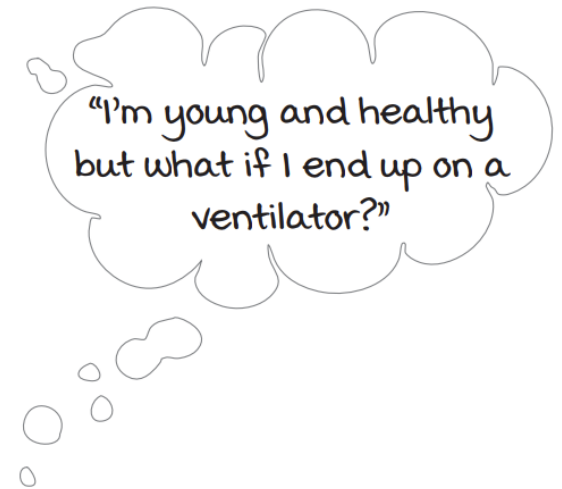
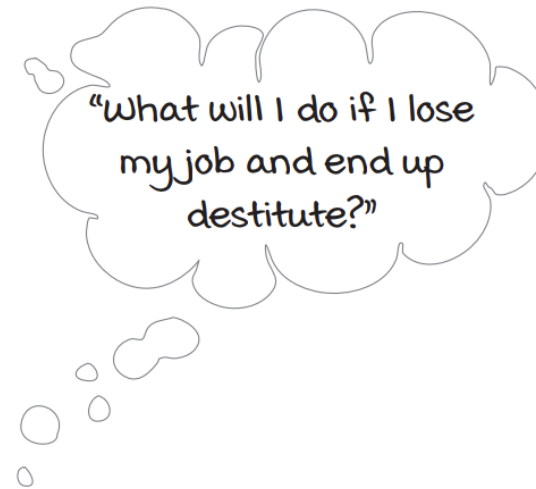
Real problem worries

are about *actual* problems that are affecting you *right now*.



Hypothetical worries

are about things that do not currently exist, but which *might* happen in the future.



Circle of control: parents/guardians

What I CAN'T control



Circle of control: Students

What my family can control



What we **CAN'T** control

Mindfulness: Parents and guardians

(Coping Skills, 2016)

Grounding technique



Balloon Breathing

BALLOON breathing

1. Think of your belly as a balloon.
2. Put your hand on your belly to feel it rise and fall.
3. Take a deep breath in through your nose to fill your balloon.
4. Hold your breath for 2 seconds.
5. Breathe out through your mouth slowly to deflate your balloon.
6. Repeat balloon breathing 5 times.

*Follow your own breathing rhythm.

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(Guion de relajacion, 2017)

Talking to your children

- ▶ **Let the Student lead, be curious.**
- ▶ **Help them name their emotions**
- ▶ **Don't try to gloss over the situation or jump into problem solving. Explore alternative solutions together.**
- ▶ **Maintain daily routines as much as possible (change can be overwhelming)**
- ▶ **Focus on the positive outcomes**



(Guia, 2020)

When to look for help for your children

- ▶ Nightmares
- ▶ Generally feeling the world is unsafe
- ▶ Irritability, anger, bad mood
- ▶ Lack of concentration
- ▶ Lack of appetite, problems sleeping
- ▶ Continuous discipline problems
- ▶ In small children, regressions
- ▶ Isolating themselves
- ▶ Use of alcohol or drugs
- ▶ Refusal to go to school, participate in activities
- ▶ anxiety
- ▶ depression
- ▶ Suicidal thoughts
- ▶ Self harm

Community Resources

- ▶ Mental Health Counseling and Therapeutic Case Management : Youth Initiatives
 - ▶ **Lauren Mizus, Clinical Program Manager, 571.748.2940**
- ▶ Crisis Response Program: Helping families meet their basic needs through connection to community resources: **Yasmin Ventura, Program Manager, 571-748-2947**
- ▶ Intervention, Prevention, and Education Program: Intervention program for at risk youth, ages 10-21, and their families, who are experiencing problems in school, the community, and their family. Information and Referrals: **Liliana Janssen-Checa (571)748- 2549**
 - ▶ **www.NVFS.org**

Q&A

References

- Kilpatrick DG, Saunders BE. (1997). Prevalence and Consequences of Child Victimization: Results from the National Survey of Adolescents. National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Medical University of South Carolina <http://www.samhsa.gov/traumajustice/traumadefinition/definition.aspx>
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- [Coping Strategies for Kids \(verywellfamily.com\)](http://www.verywellfamily.com)
- [4 Coping Skills to Help Children with Depression — Child Counseling in Davidson \(katielear.com\)](http://www.katielear.com)